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URBAN CAUCUS FORMED TO FIGHT CITY BLIGHT

by The Ven. Erwin M. Soukup

INDIANAPOLIS -- A new structure of the Episcopal Church, designed to renew the Church's life in the cities, came into being at a meeting of nearly 500 persons here, Feb. 14-16. Calling itself the Episcopal Urban Caucus, the assembly analyzed the problems of the city, established programs of action and elected a governing board to implement the mandates and challenges authorized by the Caucus.

Alternately chaired by the Rt. Rev. John T. Walker of Washington, chairman of the Urban Bishops Coalition, and the Rev. Michael S. Kendall of Scarsdale, N.Y., president of the Church and City Conference, the assembly met in four plenary sessions and four strategy group deliberations during the two-and-a-half day meeting. Major goals approved by the Caucus included programs for parish revitalization, recommendations for improvement of economic and social justice, the advocacy of energy conservation for the Church and society, and support for the cessation of the international arms race.

The tone for the conference was set by Mattie Hopkins of Chicago, who noted in her keynote dinner speech that ". . . this is not a workshop, or an institute or a non-credit course. This is an action-oriented assembly where you are to design your marching orders and then go forward to implement them." Pointing to the rising percentage of unemployment, the depletion of energy resources and the mounting long-term crisis which faces the cities of the nation, the Rt. Rev. Robert B. Appleyard of Pittsburgh, echoed Hopkins' concern and call for action. "As we engage parish people and parishes themselves in the new challenge for mission and evangelism for the Gospel of Jesus Christ," he added, "we will create new models for the life of the parish (in the city) and for people of God in this world."

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Challenge documents were hammered out in five strategy task groups and were presented to the plenary sessions for revision and approval. At the final session, in Christ Church Cathedral, the challenge documents were ratified and the governing board was authorized to implement them.

Parish Revitalization

Noting that the parish, the diocese and the entire Church must stand together in renewing parish and community life in the city, the Caucus called for greater and broader interaction between the parish and the community it serves. Leadership for action programs, said the assembly, should be drawn from and involve both clergy and laity from the immediate community. Training and education programs must receive the highest priority, and ecumenical and social resources should be explored. Greater support from the dioceses and the national Church must also be secured.

Recommendations by the Parish Revitalization Strategy Group included a focus on funding assistance, building management, stewardship, indigenous ministries to include non-stipendiary and monastic clergy and liturgies which support urban mission. Stress was placed on raising the consciousness level of Episcopalians to the urban problem.

Economic and Social Justice

The Caucus pledged itself to work with and for the poor and oppressed, minority groups, women and single-parent families. The assembly approved primary emphasis on equal opportunity in the Church and in society, and it committed itself to the funding, training, education, network-building and support for community organizing efforts. It also called for a more equitable distribution of wealth and encouraged the education and training of young people.

The Caucus recommended the formation of a national task force to create an Episcopal Empowerment Cooperative to implement the pledges and commitments it made, calling for opportunities for groups seeking constructive non-exploitative investments.

The group also supported proposals to create worker and/or community ownership of local business and industry when shut-downs are threatened or actually take place. As a tangible demonstration of support for this principle, the assembly marched in procession and set a brief symbolic picket line in front of the district sales office of United States Steel Company in downtown Indianapolis.

Some time ago, after a great deal of negotiation in which the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, and its bishop, the Rt. Rev. John H. Burt, took part, U.S. Steel agreed to sell its Youngstown, Ohio, plant to the workers instead of closing it down. U.S. Steel recently announced a reversal of this decision, and the protest march by the Caucus was a reaction to this announcement. The Caucus also petitioned the Church's Executive Council and the United States Congress to assist the workers in the purchase of the plant.

Energy

Convened by Mrs. Marion Kellern of Alexandria, Va., the strategy group on the Church's Response to the Energy Crisis noted that not much can be done about increasing the supply of fossil and nuclear fuels, but the Church can take a hand in reducing demand. "The problem lies with the power centers and the value centers of the world," she said.

The Caucus encouraged the formation of diocesan energy task forces, which would carry out audits of energy use, search out capital for energy-related rehabilitation work and establish model energy parishes using alternative energy sources.

Arms Race

Another action of the Caucus was to pass overwhelmingly a condemnation of the international arms race. As presented by the Rev. George F. Regas of Pasadena, Calif., chairman of the strategy group on Ending the Arms Race, the resolution called for an end to the building of the MX missile and for shifting the \$50 billion saved thereby into programs for rehabilitating the cities. The Caucus also called for a plan in which the national Church would undertake to educate the nation on the continual escalation of amassing nuclear weaponry.

Organization

The caucus form of assembly was formally adopted on the final day of meeting. Byron Rushing, of Boston, introduced the recommendation of the strategy group on Organization, Membership, Governance and Funding which outlined the membership of a Governing Board to plan the work and policies of the Caucus between its regular meetings.

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At the final session of the Caucus, the assembly elected the following to serve on the Board: elected by the assembly at large were -- bishops: the Rt. Rev. Coleman McGehee, Detroit; the Rt. Rev. Paul Moore, New York; the Rt. Rev. John Walker, Washington; the Rt. Rev. Arthur Walmsley, Hartford, Conn. -- clergy: the Rev. Lloyd Casson, Washington; the Rev. Barbara Harris, Philadelphia; the Rev. George Regas, Pasadena, Calif.; the Rev. Gibson Winter, Princeton, N.J. -- laity: Mattie Hopkins, Chicago; Lydia Lopez, Los Angeles; Byron Rushing, Boston; Julio Torres, Cambridge, Mass. Additional laity were elected to the Board by the lay membership of the Caucus alone: Eddie Mae Binion, St. Louis; Bill Bolling, Atlanta; Sr. Arlen Margaret, Hartford, N. Y.; Anne Schriebner, New York.

The Board has been charged by the Caucus to select six additional members in order to achieve the broadest possible representation which reflects oppressed groups not already represented on the Board. It is hoped that the Governing Board will meet in the spring and that a meeting of the Caucus will be held in early 1981.

Other Elements

There were other groups of the Church which caucused during the assembly. They included the Appalachian People's Service Organization (APSO), the Task Force on Women, a number of ecumenical representatives, seminarians and several representatives of the poor.

The ecumenical caucus, headed by Betty L. Olive of the Unitarian-Universalist Community Church of New York City, complimented the assembly for its efforts but urged the Episcopal Urban Caucus to continue its ecumenical dimension. The seminarians urged increased emphasis on education and training programs in the seminaries and continued representation at Episcopal Urban Caucus meetings for seminarians.

Speaking for poor people, Elyse Bradt and Nellie Parker of Philadelphia introduced a sobering note at the final session. Remarking that the poor had not been asked for a report, Bradt said she was "upset" that the Caucus was not meeting the issue of classism. "We are poor," she added, "until everybody is not poor. And I have my Ph.D. -- poor, human and determined." Her remarks were given a standing ovation.

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Another extra-agenda item introduced at the final session was a resolution calling for presidential amnesty for "all undocumented people (those without passports or study or work permits) presently living in the U.S." The Rt. Rev. David Reed, Bishop of Kentucky, objected that such an action might raise questions about the credibility of the Episcopal Urban Caucus in lobbying for possible future unlimited immigration. The resolution was passed overwhelmingly.

The Caucus has authorized the Board to apply for status as a not-for-profit corporation in order to qualify for funding from Church organizations, individuals and foundations. It is also expected that a request will be made to designate a portion of the funds raised by Venture in Mission to assist in funding the program of the Caucus.

In evaluating the results of the Indianapolis meeting, the Rev. Hugh C. White of Detroit, director of the General Staff for the Assembly, said he was pleased with the results. "The actions accomplished were 80 percent realistic," he said, "and that is not always true of this kind of gathering."

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PICTURE CAPTIONS (Credit for both photos: Erwin M. Soukup)

80059/1 Social activist Mattie Hopkins launched the inaugural meeting of the Episcopal Urban Caucus Feb. 14 with a keynote speech telling the 500 participants to "design your marching orders and then go forward to implement them." The four-day conference in Indianapolis sought to pave the way for a resurgence of Episcopal Church urban activism growing out of the work of the Urban Bishops Coalition and the Church and City Conference.

80059/2 U.S. Steel's reversal of a decision to sell its Youngstown plant to a worker coalition sparked a quick response from the 500 Episcopalians gathered in Indianapolis Feb. 14-16 to launch the Episcopal Urban Caucus. The participants left their deliberations and marched in procession to a district office where they threw up a symbolic picket line underlining the demands that U.S. Steel hold to its agreement.

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NOTE: Photos are enclosed for the DP list only, but are available on request from the Diocesan Press Service, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

